



'Roid Ragers

Two macho men and the bitchy bodybuilding world that surrounds -- and, perhaps, spawned -- the BALCO steroids case

By Tommy Craggs

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"Once," says Emeric Delczeg, 51 years old and built like a fireplug, "I was called to help Barry Bonds to pose." It was for a muscle magazine photo shoot sometime last year, Delczeg explains in his thick Eastern-bloc accent. "That's the first time and last time I saw Barry Bonds in my life. And you know what? He's not that big. I don't know what people are talking about. He's over 6 feet tall, and he has, like, 17-inch arms. That's nothing." He pulls up a sleeve of his T-shirt and curls his right arm, flexing. "I'm 5-7, and my arms are 20. I weigh 230, and he weighs 230, same as me. He's not big." Delczeg shakes his head and shuffles off to retrieve a photograph from a recent Masters Olympia, a competition for bodybuilders 40 and older. "I tell you what," he goes on. "If he wants to get ripped -- like I am here, for example -- he would have to go down to 180 pounds, with the fat he has on.



AP Wide World Photos



Victor Conte, founder of the Bay Area Laboratory Co-Operative (BALCO), outside the federal courthouse in San Francisco.

Christopher M. Smith

Plus, he's 40. You get older, you get heavier." Delczeg (pronounced Dell-segg) is standing under a harsh fluorescent light in the Belmont office of his nutritional supplements company, Fitness Enterprises. The room is cramped and anonymous, one of several in this cheery, flesh-colored building, which fronts on a busy road in Belmont where one might go if one were shopping for a new 5-iron or socket wrench or barbed-wire tattoo. These are the unassuming margins of the BALCO steroid case, in which Delczeg, a minor bodybuilder and businessman, has become a reluctant bit player. "See," he says, returning to the photo, which depicts a small group of oily, plasticky men, a lineup of Dorian Grays. "This guy's 40 years old. This guy's 50. If you cover the head, you can't even tell."

Here under the light, Delczeg looks every bit his age. He has short gray hair and a neat gray mustache, and from time to time his face breaks into what seems like an involuntary grimace. If he looks strained, there's a reason. He has spent the past hour detailing just how he came to be standing on the fringe of a massive, far-reaching sports scandal involving some of the best athletes in the world and a supplements company in Burlingame; how he, a supposedly innocent man, found himself on Pages 29 to 33 of an IRS special agent's search-warrant affidavit, fingered by "a confidential informant" as a "steroid supplier" to BALCO; how his trash was searched, his car was watched, his bank records were subpoenaed;



how, most important, he thinks he knows who this informant is, and how he's pretty sure it's a preening, no-good ex-associate of his who would "sell his mother out."

"I don't know if it is Ron Kramer or if it is not Ron Kramer," Delczeg says. "All I know is, Ron Kramer was my employee, and he came and threatened me, verbally, and said he would do anything possible to destroy me."

Of course, there's a possibility that Delczeg's guess is wrong, and anyone who says otherwise, assures Kramer, now running his own supplements company in Arizona, will get a call from his lawyer. The Delczeg-Kramer dispute isn't at all surprising given the fuzzy nature of the BALCO case, which, it should be noted, was built in large part on the bags of trash intercepted outside the Burlingame company's office. Even now, eight months after the public first learned of the investigation, little is certain about the case, down to its very motivation. At its core, is it about a supplement company's allegedly dodgy finances? About Bonds? About baseball as a whole? About sport on a global scale?

Perhaps the best place to find a clue is out here on the margin, where you'll come across two old bodybuilders doing what bodybuilders have always done: striking poses and staring each other down. It may not be the heart of the case, but it might very well be its id: that peculiar strain of American macho, in which the most important thing is looking better than the next guy.

Back in his office, Delczeg is stooped behind his desk. "I keep this here for Ron Kramer," he says, sounding more frightened than anything else as he pulls out an aluminum baseball bat.

On Sept. 3, at least a year into their investigation of the Bay Area Laboratory Co-Operative, IRS agents spearheaded a daytime raid of the firm's tiny offices and left with their arms full of boxes. It was their first public move in the probe -- the agents reportedly placed IRS placards on the dashboards of their cars in a sort of Zorro flourish -- and since that day the case has climbed steadily in the nation's consciousness. In November, a handful of Major League Baseball players, including Bonds, testified before a federal grand jury. In January, the scandal provided an applause line in President Bush's State of the Union address: "So tonight I call on team owners, union representatives, coaches, and players to take the lead, to send the right signal, to get tough, and to get rid of steroids now."

And in February, Attorney General John Ashcroft announced the results of the investigation: a 42-count indictment accusing four Bay Area men of supplying illegal performance-enhancing drugs to several world-class athletes. Charged in the alleged conspiracy were Victor Conte Jr., the founder of BALCO; Greg Anderson, Bonds' personal weight trainer; James Valente, the lab's vice president; and Remi Korchemny, a track coach. All four have pleaded not guilty and are free on bail. "This is not just a call to action," Ashcroft intoned. "It is a call to the values that make our nation and its people strong and free."

The counterattack came one month later, outside a San Francisco courtroom, where Anderson's attorney, J. Tony Serra, was blasting the BALCO investigation as a "headhunting expedition" led by a jealous IRS agent who worked out at Bonds' gym and "looked around and saw a lot of buffed people and decided they must be on steroids." Serra went on to call the agent, a one-time San Jose State basketball player named Jeff Novitzky, "a failed athlete." Said Serra: "From my perspective, he was jealous of all the attention Bonds received. From my perspective, he targeted him."

A week later, Bonds' attorney, Michael Rains, raised the same issue in a story in the *New York Times*, venturing that maybe Bonds once snubbed Novitzky at the gym, leading the agent to tell his boss, "I can get

him." The implication is almost comical: that the government mounted a sweeping, high-profile investigation into the alleged abuse of steroids in professional sports, simply because one guy didn't like the look of the fellow at the bench press. The argument would be merely peculiar if it didn't point up that lingering question: What, exactly, prompted the BALCO inquiry? Novitzky thus far has said little to the press. But a story in the May edition of *Playboy* has perhaps provided the clearest picture yet: At one point, Novitzky turned to a cop, who would soon go undercover with a \$300 gym membership, and said of Bonds, "You think he's on steroids?"

The spine of the government's case is described in Novitzky's 52-page search-warrant affidavit, made public alongside the indictment. The affidavit details the investigators' gradual encirclement of BALCO; how, for instance, they read Conte's cryptic e-mails ("How can I take advantage of the connections you have for the E without a lot of risk?"), and combed his bank records ("A \$1,000 check deposited on 5/2/2001, from the bank account of a current NFL player"), and rooted through BALCO's trash and medical waste ("1/13/03: Eleven used syringes; one vial of testosterone"). One curious aspect of the case: Although documents show a parade of athletes walking through BALCO's doors, those athletes' names have been redacted from the government's public filings.

Perhaps more curious, however, is the cameo of Emeric Delczeg, who pops up at about the midway point of the affidavit in what reads like a prelude to an indictment. "The informant told [the San Mateo County Narcotics Task Force] that Delczeg, who is Bulgarian [he is actually an ethnic Hungarian who grew up in Romania], obtains steroids and other performance enhancing drugs from Europe and provides them to BALCO in exchange for permission to sell a supplement on which BALCO or its subsidiary, SNAC System Inc., owns licensing rights," the affidavit states. Furthermore, Delczeg supposedly spent "several hours" inside BALCO's offices and received more than \$30,000 in checks from the BALCO subsidiary.

Delczeg denies the allegations, and his appearance in the affidavit surprised many people in the bodybuilding community, already reeling from the elevation of steroids to a matter of such grave national concern that even the president has been furrowing his brow. A competitive bodybuilder at 19 and Romania's national champion at 27, Delczeg is an avuncular, well-regarded figure among bodybuilders -- "a good person, a solid person ... a stand-up guy," according to one description. Ron Avidan, who runs a Web site for bodybuilding and fitness news called Getbig.com, wonders why investigators targeted "a regular guy" like Delczeg in the first place. "You've got crack dealers down the street here," he says, "and you're spending money on Emeric?" Ross Nadel, chief of the criminal division in the U.S. Attorney's Office for Northern California, would not comment on the portion of the affidavit related to Delczeg. He did note, however, that an affidavit is "obviously not a document that is cavalierly written."

In the world of bodybuilding, steroid use -- both legal and illegal -- has never been a state secret. "If you're in bodybuilding," Avidan says, "you're gonna use steroids. *Everybody* uses steroids." (In bodybuilding's cousin sport, weightlifting, steroids for years offered a front line for a kind of proxy Cold War, a literal arms race. American weightlifters spent much of the 1950s wondering what the hell the Soviets were eating and then spent the 1960s gobbling pink Dianabol pills in an effort to catch up.) Anabolic steroids, illegal in the United States without a prescription, are perhaps the perfect bodybuilding drug: They boost the body's testosterone levels, thereby increasing muscle mass, accelerating recovery time, and raising energy levels, though side effects range from high cholesterol and heart damage to paranoia, impotence, and aggressive behavior. Delczeg, for one, acknowledges taking steroids for more than 30 years, the past eight or so under a doctor's supervision. Initially diagnosed with low testosterone, he says he now has the hormones of a man half his age. To no one's surprise, he is an unabashed supporter of prudent steroid use, and he illustrates the effectiveness of synthetic hormones by plucking a technical book off his shelf and pointing at tables. "If Ashcroft and all those guys read this book, and went to the doctor," Delczeg says, "they would go on [steroids] immediately."

Despite the ominous overtones of the affidavit, Delczeg has not been indicted and does not expect to be. His

links to BALCO are easily explained, he insists: He was spending a lot of time there because he was rehabbing an injury in the firm's gym. He says the checks were commissions on sales of ZMA, a zinc-magnesium supplement marketed by BALCO's subsidiary, and the only things he imports from Europe are a Bulgarian supplement called Tribestan and a Romanian chicken-embryo extract called Humanofort. "I have no illegal activities. I have nothing to hide," he says, sounding more upset that the affidavit included his home address than about its implication that he peddles steroids. "I could have a stalker, you never know. I've had many e-mails from bodybuilders -- I don't know if they're homosexual or what -- who say they want to meet me, spend time with me."

So how could this have happened? Delczeg has an idea. "See this picture of Ron Kramer?" he says one day, seated at his office computer. "Can you see? You can tell he's a jerk." On the screen is a photo of a big, bald man with a trickle of a goatee, wearing a zebra-print coat and a pair of blue-tinted shades. "He thinks he's WWF," Delczeg says, almost giggling.

Ron Kramer, 40 years old, is an edgy, moody guy who speaks with a New York accent and says "fuck" like other people say "um." A conversation with him is an intense affair: When I called him one recent Thursday, he first refused to speak to me without his attorney on the other line, then went on to talk for 45 minutes anyway, beginning with a boast that he had called a *New York Times* reporter a "fucking parasite," adding that he has "plenty of friends" in New York, whatever that means, and that, though he isn't a racist, he is the kind of guy who will "call a nigger a 'nigger.'" Minutes later, though, he settled down and spoke calmly and credibly about the history of a plant extract and supplement called ecdysterone. The impression was of a man -- sputtering one minute, articulate and intelligent the next -- who's fully aware of his awkward, and perhaps undeserved, position on the fringe of a global scandal. (Of course, the interview itself became an issue. He now claims our conversation was off the record, although there was no such agreement made.)

It's not clear when Kramer first arrived in California, but he certainly left a distinct impression on the bodybuilding scene while here. He was a "vindictive son of a bitch," according to one Santa Cruz law enforcement officer familiar with the fitness business. (Kramer owned a Gold's Gym in Santa Cruz in the early 1990s.) The officer adds: "A lot of people who gravitate to bodybuilding have issues. The fragile male ego, the insecurity, the machismo, the 'Fuck you, I'm bad' -- that makes me want to throw up. They turn [the sport] into a fucking turd."

Sometime around 1997, when Kramer was working out at Redwood City's Powerhouse Gym, the owner, Rob Suelflohn, began receiving complaints about his conduct -- at least 10 in all, Suelflohn says. "He'd walk up to a woman and say, 'Why don't you try a real man,' and she'd be sitting there with her boyfriend," recalls Suelflohn, a former shot-putter, who one day decided to confront Kramer at the gym. "I yelled at him, 'Everybody's right about you. You don't have a heart or a soul. All you want to do is hurt somebody.'" Kramer's response? "He broke down crying," Suelflohn says. "Like a baby. I was like, 'Jesus Christ, get ahold of yourself, you piece of shit.'"

In October 1997, Kramer was convicted in San Mateo County of selling large amounts of two different types of anabolic steroids; he was slapped with six months of house arrest and a three-year probation. Around this time, he began working at Fitness Enterprises, then in San Carlos, under Delczeg, who had once sponsored a bodybuilding contest Kramer had promoted. (At one point, according to Delczeg, the two worked a contest at which BALCO's Victor Conte presented his vitamin supplement ZMA to a roomful of bodybuilders. Conte later thanked Delczeg in a muscle magazine article, but not Kramer. Furious, Kramer now calls Conte "a class-A scumbag.")

Kramer and Delczeg initially got along well. "He really liked Emeric," says an ex-girlfriend of Kramer who didn't want to be named in this article, hoping to quarantine herself from the scandal's fallout. "He said that he helped him out a lot. Ron was very philosophical, you know. He told me, 'There are people who, if you

beg for money on the street, just give you the money. There are people who just give you advice. But then there are people who really help you grow in life.' He said Emeric was one of those people." In 2000, Kramer was arrested on an alleged parole violation (the case was later dropped); Delczeg floated his bail. "He told me, 'My father and my mother did not bail me out,'" Delczeg recalls. "'What you did, Emeric, my brother, my mother, my father did not. You're the only one.'"

"Hell, no," Kramer says when asked if he initially looked up to Delczeg. "I really wouldn't say I looked up to him. That's a stretch of the imagination. That may be what he wants to believe -- let him believe that. There were plenty of days [when I thought] it'd be better going to jail than sitting next to Emeric for eight hours."

As is the case with a lot of things, Kramer and Delczeg offer differing versions of how their partnership soured. After a few months of working with Delczeg, Kramer began to strike out on his own, launching a supplements company, ThermoLife International, and running it from the San Carlos office he shared with Delczeg. (One of his products is a near-replica of Tribestan, a supplement made from the noxious plant *Tribulus terrestris* that Delczeg introduced into the United States. Kramer's supplement is called Tribosten.)

In 2000, the two moved into adjoining offices in Belmont, with Kramer now operating more or less independently. Around that time, Delczeg says, he began to worry about Kramer's behavior, which veered from merely unprofessional to occasionally threatening. "I heard him talk on the phone," he says. "Very scary. He was saying he was going to send 10 pit bulls. I don't know who he was talking to, but I heard him: 'Motherfuckers, I'm gonna send some pit bulls and let them loose on you and your employees.'" Kramer once told a supplements company that its samples tasted "like dog shit," Delczeg says. Most embarrassing, though, were the fights at conventions. At one event in Las Vegas, Delczeg says, Kramer tried to choke a rival on the convention floor. "He got beat up," he says. "I just saw [Kramer] down on the floor. These guys were beating him."

"He's sick in the head," Delczeg continues. "He tells himself the entire world is against him, and that he's good, and everybody else is bad. ... I'm concerned, because this man should not walk in the street. He should be in a hospital somewhere, treating whatever he has in his head. I don't know what happened to him in his childhood. I never saw anybody before with such anger, you know?"

Kramer fires back that Delczeg is a "corrupt" businessman; that he is indeed a steroid peddler; and, even worse, that he is a phony-steroid peddler. "That's why I dumped Emeric as a partner," he says. "I'm not interested in snake oil. He's the king of snake oil." (Says Delczeg in response: "My God, this guy. I was buying steroids from *him*.")

Kramer laughs off some of the stories about his behavior, and in general seems much more concerned with the implication that he might be an informant -- "a slander of my good character," he says, referring to a Reuters story, later retracted, that tapped him as the BALCO informant. In the tight, hypercompetitive subculture of bodybuilding, it seems, a snitch is a pariah, but an asshole isn't all that bad. Sometimes, after all, it's the asshole who gets the trophy. (Consider Arnold Schwarzenegger in the documentary *Pumping Iron*, which, though it was one of his first appearances on film, may have done more to prepare the world for Arnold the politician than anything Schwarzenegger did afterward. In the movie, he comes across as conniving, even clever, a true artist of the psych-out, and at the close of the competition he's the one getting patted on the deltoids.)

Court documents show that Kramer, after his probation-violation arrest, did indeed serve as an informant for the San Mateo County Narcotics Task Force, but it seems unlikely he provided any information in the BALCO investigation. In a 2001 motion to terminate Kramer's probation (eventually granted), his then-attorney, Geoffrey Carr, wrote, "The Defendant has worked his little fingers to the bone as an informant and general source of information for the Narcotics Task Force on steroid related offenses." But

the extent of that assistance, Carr says now, laughing ruefully at his choice of phrase, was "general" information about steroids, unrelated to the BALCO case. "There's a lot of bad shit out there," Carr says, referring to the Reuters story, which was followed by a report on the Smoking Gun Web site that also alleged Kramer was the BALCO informant. "If he is the guy, that is the worst affidavit I've ever seen. ... There's no reason to believe it's Ron Kramer. This is not the dude." (In addition, the search-warrant affidavit says the informant "pleaded guilty to felony steroid distribution charges a few years ago" but that because of his cooperation with authorities "he has not done any jail time for his steroid conviction." Kramer spent six months under house arrest, and his work with the Narcotics Task Force apparently did not begin until 2000, after his probation-violation arrest, not after his steroid-peddling conviction.)

Things came to a head between Delczeg and Kramer in the summer of 2001. After an argument with Kramer in his office, Delczeg filed a report with the Belmont Police Department. Kramer, according to Delczeg's written account of the incident, "burst in my private office, swearing, pushing [sic], spitting [sic] on me and threatening [sic] with death." Delczeg sought a restraining order, but didn't show up in court. He says he was recovering from an operation the day before on a torn triceps.

Since then, Kramer has moved to Arizona, but in many ways he has become a catchall for Delczeg's troubles. The disappearance of the "Fitness Enterprises" sign from outside Delczeg's office? Kramer. The recent dip in his business? Kramer. His stress? Kramer.

And though he can't prove it, Delczeg thinks Kramer also may be behind a Web site, since taken down, titled "Emeric Delczeg's Anabolic Steroids: No, you don't need to work-out." On the site, there was a photo of Delczeg, flexing, and next to that a few paragraphs of childish text:

"Hello everybody! Its your friend Emeric Delczeg. I have my underground steroid website up & running now. You wanna be big like me??? No problem cool dude. I got the shit to make you Mr. Universe, huh!

"We have nothing but the finest Anabolics from Hungary

"I've been doing steroids for years!!!

"What, you think I got those muscles from working out? HELL NO cool dude!! I take steroids to get those weird looking muscles!

"Click here to e-mail papa Emeric"

"Who else would do that?" Delczeg says. "I mean, who would have the interest? He's the only one who threatened me, who said he's going to do anything possible to destroy me and my business." (I asked Kramer about the site, but on that day he was refusing to speak on the record.)

"He should sit down," Delczeg continues, "take a piece of paper out, and put on the paper, 'What Emeric did for me.'" His hand skips down the imaginary list. "Bum, bum, bum, bum, bum, bum, bum, bum, bum. ... I gave him a job. Then I bailed him out. Then I gave him a profession. What else can you ask for? Can you see? Can you see why everybody was so furious when they heard what he did? I mean, if somebody saves you three times, wouldn't you kiss his ass all your life?"

Kramer, for his part, says Delczeg is a "wolf in sheep's clothing." "There are decrepit people everywhere," he says, "and Emeric is one of the most decrepit."

And back and forth they go, matching each other, pose for pose.

The 24 Hour Fitness in San Carlos sits amid a stretch of hardware stores, auto-body shops, and chiropractic

offices along Industrial Road; it's a standard sort of gym, with an Explorer in every other parking spot, a rubber mat on its floor, a funk song on its speakers, and -- on this clammy Monday morning, as Delczeg and I make our way through the Nautiluses -- a middle-aged man greeting his workout buddy with a loud fart. "You farted right on Emeric!" the buddy says, turning toward us and smiling. "Emeric! You lost some hair there!" Delczeg doesn't seem to notice.

Today, Delczeg is going to show me the official Delczeg Training System, which he boasts will have a minor role in a small upcoming feature film, *No Pain, No Gain*, the story of "a bodybuilder who longs to be respected for his mind." (It's being billed as the "first major bodybuilding film since Schwarzenegger's *Pumping Iron*.") Delczeg, too, has a cameo in the movie. He will play "an Arnold-esque character ... who imparts knowledge onto the star of the film," director Samuel Turcotte says. "Kind of like Yoda, but a bodybuilder." Delczeg even gets to deliver the philosophy behind the movie, Turcotte says, something about reaching the "point where pain becomes pleasure."

"Today," says Delczeg, now at the incline press, the first stop in a circuit around the room, "I do chest."

He loads up a bar with weights and tucks his 5-foot-7 frame into the seat. "Two hundred twenty-five pounds," he says, and when he lifts the bar, his face strains and explodes into a thousand wrinkles.

He gets out and loads up the bar again. "Two seventy-five," he says.

Then again. "Two ninety-five," he says. This time he dangles two 35-pound weights at the ends of the bar and enlists two men to stand on either side. Their job will be to pull those weights off as he's pushing the bar up, and to shove them back on when he's bringing the bar down. He does eight reps this way.

This is the crux of his system, he explains. "The negative [motion] is what benefits your muscle," Delczeg says, "because the negative is resisting. Resisting involves the muscle. When you train like this, definitely, if you don't use anabolic steroids, forget about it." On the days he works his legs, Delczeg says, he's so sore he can't even sit on the toilet.

"People, they stop and watch," he continues. "'*Those guys must be crazy.*' They see a lot of weights, and they ask, 'How you don't get a heart attack?'" For this reason, Delczeg says, he can't seem to hang onto a regular workout partner. Someone canceled on him a few days ago, saying he was busy. "When they say they're busy," he says, "I know they're not ready to get hurt." And when they do show up -- well, let's just say that one guy wound up vomiting in the locker room. "This," Delczeg says with pride, "is very, very, very tough."

Very, very, very tough. Maybe this isn't just a scandal's margin, after all. Maybe, in some ways, this is its source. Is there anyone involved in the BALCO case -- cops, athletes, defendants -- who *didn't* work out in the same nexus of Gold's and World Gyms and Powerhouses? Consider: An agent from California's Bureau of Narcotics Enforcement goes undercover with a \$300 Bay Area Fitness membership, hoping to latch onto trainer Greg Anderson, and what's his first concern, according to *Playboy*? That he'd run into another cop. Where else could a case like this have come from -- a weird, unwieldy case, so full of rivalries and jealousies and eccentricities -- if not a place like this, where middle-aged men fart at the entrance, and guys puke in the locker room, and a 51-year-old with the hormones of a 25-year-old pushes a couple hundred pounds skyward, over and over, until he can find pleasure in the pain; where everyone -- the cop, the IRS agent, the ballplayer -- comes so he can look better than the next guy. The enclosed world of the gym, demimonde of macho, land of the very, very, very tough.